

Jean Donovan

Prologue (spoken by Pat):

El Salvador is small, but heavily populated. In the twentieth century, one right-wing military dictator after another took control of this Central American country. These dictators believed that the wealthy aristocrats should own all the land. The poor peasant people should work the land. The poor had few rights and little freedom.

Today is December 2, 1980. For several years, students, human rights workers, union members, and some church leaders have sided with the poor and the oppressed majority. They are working for land reform. However, a small group of Salvadorans have become left-wing guerrillas. They counter the right-wing government's military violence with their own.

A number of nuns, priests, and lay people have come to El Salvador from the United States. They want to help the poor. One lay missionary is Jean Donovan from Connecticut. I am spending a few days in San Salvador, the capital, with Jean and with Dorothy Kazel, an Ursuline nun. My name is Pat, and this morning, I'm with Jean as she drives the mission van to La Libertad.

Pat: Where is La Libertad?

Jean: It's a port city by the Pacific. It's about twenty-five miles away.

Pat: Yesterday you taught a class in San Salvador. The day before that you distributed cloths to people who live by the city's dump. Today you hand out food in La Libertad. What else do you do?

Jean: I play the guitar when we celebrate Mass.

Pat: You laugh a lot too!

Jean: Yes! That's what people like about me--my sense of humor.

Pat: And a lot of wisecracking and jokes too!

Jean: Yes! But being down here is no joke! I've been here over a year, since July 1989, and I've seen too much.

Pat: Did you know Archbishop Romero?

Jean: Yes. I went to the cathedral most Sundays to hear his homilies. They were the only way we could get news and hear the truth.

Pat: Did you think he'd be assassinated back in March?

Jean: I feared it. He spoke out against what's happening here, and the government didn't like that. Every day, soldiers march into villages and take away anyone who supports land reform. Sometimes it's the left-wing guerrillas who come. They kill anyone they think is helping the government. The peasants are caught in the middle.

Pat: Seems to me you may be caught there, too. Aren't you afraid you'll be killed?

Jean: They don't kill blond-haired, blue-eyed Americans!

Pat: They haven't yet. But they could start.

Jean: I know, and I am afraid when Dorothy and I accompany people in danger. I'm afraid when we drive this van to bring supplies to the outlying villages.

Pat: Then why do you stay?

Jean: I have a gut feeling. I want to get closer to God. This is the only way I can think of to do that.

Pat: You're twenty-seven years old! Shouldn't you be back in the United States raising children or working as an accountant for that company you left in Cleveland?

Jean: My work is here. The government's death squads and the guerrillas kill the villagers. They leave the children orphans. How can I turn my back on them? They need food and shelter. They need someone to hold them at night when they cry.

Pat: You told me your friends and family back in the United States are afraid you'll be hurt. They've asked you to come home.

Jean: Maybe that would be the reasonable thing to do. But the children live in a sea of tears. My music lightens their hearts. My jokes make them smile. How could I leave this insane place?

Pat: Aren't you the least bit tempted to go home?

Jean: Yes. Several times I've thought about it, but the children keep me here.

Pat: They keep Dorothy, too.

Jean: Yes, and Maura and Ita, as well. They're Maryknoll nuns.

Pat: Why haven't I met them?

Jean: They've been at a meeting in Managua, Nicaragua. This evening, Dorothy and I

will pick them up at the airport.

Pat: Do you ever get away from San Salvador?

Jean: Just a couple of months ago, I flew to Ireland for a friend's wedding. I spent some time with Doug while I was gone.

Pat: Your fiancé?

Jean: Yes. It was hard leaving him, but I had to come back. I think that the hardship here is God's way of taking me out into the desert. God's preparing me to meet and love him more fully.

Pat: Do your friends understand this?

Jean: A little.

Pat: I admire what you're doing, Jean. But I don't think I could do it. It's too dangerous. The death squads will kill you and Dorothy and Ita and Maura one day.

Jean: Why would they do that?

Pat: You're helping the people revolt.

Jean: We're helping the people find a better life.

Pat: I doubt if the Salvadoran government looks at it that way. They probably think you're interfering busybodies who have no right to be here.

Jean: Maybe. At Archbishop Romero's funeral in March, government soldiers killed forty-four peasants and wounded hundreds of others. I thought the death squad would kill me that night.

Pat: It could still.

Jean: I know. I actually witnessed a death squad kill several of my Salvadoran friends.

Pat: I'm so glad they didn't kill you!

Jean: They ignored me, but between the guerrilla soldiers on the left and the dictator and his army on the right, we constantly live in the midst of violence.

Pat: You could be next.

Jean: That's true, but not today. Today we simply take food to the people in La Libertad. Such a simple thing to do. And tonight, Dorothy and I pick up Maura and Ita.

Pat: I wish I could go with you, but I have to leave El Salvador this afternoon.

Jean: Please, wherever you go, tell them about the struggle here--the injustice, the death squads, the violence on both sides. Get the word out!

Pat: I will. I will tell people that you, and many like you, are trying to live the Gospels. I've seen you feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, shelter the homeless, visit the sick and the imprisoned, and bury the dead. Jesus asked us to do these things. You're doing them, Jean.

Jean: All I'm trying to do is to live what I believe--to put my faith into action.

Pat: Please be careful.

Jean: I will, but first I will care for the children.

Epilogue

That evening, the evening of December 2, 1980, Jean Donovan and Dorothy Kazel picked up Maura Clarke and Ita Ford at the airport outside San Salvador. On the way back to the capital, members of El Salvador's National Guard stopped their van at a roadblock.

The soldiers drove the four women to an isolated spot. They abused them, shot them, and then buried their bodies in a shallow grave next to the road.

The civil war in El Salvador took the lives of more than 75,000 people. Among them were six Jesuit priests whom right-wing soldiers killed in 1989. On January 16, 1992, the twelve-year civil war in El Salvador ended when the government signed an agreement with the leftists.

See the play *Points of Arrival* to learn more about Jean, who as a young woman, showed what really following the Gospels means.